

Handling Stress After a Disaster

Disasters create a tremendous amount of stress.

Every person affected by a disaster experiences extreme stress. While most people come through such events with only temporary emotional difficulties related to the immediate stress, others may be more severely affected. The level of stress a person experiences depends on things such as age, gender, life experience, and any personal losses experienced as a result of the disaster. Some people experience more or less stress depending on how quickly they get help, food, and other necessities.

Remember:

- Stress is a normal reaction
- Fight or flight response helps us focus on what needs to be done
- Children may show their distress by becoming overactive

More severe stress may be caused by:

- Inability to return home due to damage
- Inability to return to work or school
- Physical injury
- Loss of someone dear to you
- Witnessing death or injury of others

Warning signs that show stress level is too high:

- Persistent tiredness
- Inability to concentrate
- Flashes of anger
- Increased use of alcohol, drugs or tobacco
- Returning to substance misuse
- Headaches, backaches, stomachaches and other ailments
- Feelings of anxiety or helplessness
- Eating too much or too little

Stress that is not dealt with can damage a person's mental and physical health.

- Drop-off in job performance
- Unable to handle daily tasks
- Domestic violence

Recognizing and handling stress properly can help meet challenges faced each day.

- Talk about it with family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers
- Try physical activity, especially walking
- Know your limits and take time for relaxation and naps
- Take control
- Continue to take prescribed medications
- Avoid self-medicating
- Avoid substance abuse

For people experiencing more serious problems such as:

Thoughts of suicide Flashbacks Hopelessness
A feeling of unreality Extreme anger Behavior problems

Consider help from a mental health professional.

Getting help is very important. If you are having trouble with stress or handling things in your life, your local mental health center can help. For more information about handling stress after a disaster or to contact your local mental health center, please call Joanna Forester, LCSW at 919.715.2780 or visit the Division's web site at <http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/mhddsas/disasterpreparedness/index.html>